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Rosanna Farbøl. "Commemoration of a Cold War: The Politics of History and Heritage at Cold War Memory sites in Denmark." *Cold War History* 15:4 (2015): 471-490. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2015.1028532>

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Review by **Rasmus Glenthøj**, University of Southern Denmark

In 1935 the Norwegian historian Sverre Steen wrote: "We need to remember that history is used as a weapon within current affairs. This is how it *was*. This is how it *is*."¹ In many ways, this quote sums up not only Rosanna Farbøl's article on "Commemoration of a Cold War," but the general focus of her scholarship as of yet.²

Farbøl's article brings together Cold-War studies with memory studies in an effort to understand the politics of history in Denmark. Her main argument is that the past and the present are interconnected in current Danish politics. This is especially true when it comes to the Cold War. For the last fifteen years the Cold War has been at the centre of an ideological struggle between the political parties in an effort to come to terms with the past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*). Farbøl sheds new light on the topic by analysing the politics of history in connection to Danish Cold War museums and heritages sites. The study suggests that Cold-War memories in Denmark are war memories of a rather particular kind: they involve no victims, no suffering, and no losers (471).

¹ My translation. In Norwegian: "Vi må huske på at historien brukes som et våpen i dagens aktuelle strid; slik har det vært, og slik er det". Sverre Steen. "Siste slektledds historiegranskning." Halvdan Koht, J.S. Worm-Müller & Sverre Steen. *Trin i norsk historieforskning*. Oslo: J.M. Stenersens forlag (1935), 51.

² Rosanna Farbøl, *Koldkrigere, medløbere og røde lejesvende: Den Kolde Krig i dansk historiekultur 1989-2015*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Aarhus, 2016; Rosanna Farbøl, "Framing the Past, Shaping the Future: the Political Uses of the Foreign Policy Tradition in Contemporary Danish Politics," Valur Ingimundarson & Rósa Magnúsdóttir (eds.), *Nordic Cold War Cultures: Ideological Promotion, Public Reception, and East-West Interactions* (Helsinki: Aleksanteri Institute, 2015), 189-206; Rosanna Farbøl, "Kunsten at lægge historien til rette": Anders Fogh Rasmussen og opgøret med den danske udenrigspolitiske tradition," *TEMP - tidsskrift for historie*, (2012), 65-90; Rosanna Farbøl, "Irakkrigen og den historiske legitimering," *Slagmark*, Nr. 60 (2011), 73-85.

As the author states, the Cold War has received little attention within memory studies just as memory studies have received little attention amongst the students of the Cold War (the Vietnam War being the exception to the rule). She argues that this apparent lack of attention may be caused by the absence of clear and powerful *lieux de mémoire* (473). Conversely, Farbøl suggest that there is research gap to be filled - especially within Scandinavian historiography. Furthermore, she advocates that her approach could fruitfully be applied to other case studies than her own of Denmark. This would in time allow the development of an international comparative framework (471-73, 490).

Farbøl's article clearly shows the implications of the post-modernist approach found within memory studies when applied to a topic such as Cold-War studies. The different schools within the field (e.g. traditionalist, revisionist, and post-revisionist) are only briefly mentioned in her study. This is with good reason as Farbøl's research interest has little to do with any discussion of 'wie es eigentlich gewesen.' Her focus is not on the past *per se*, but more on the connection between the past and the present.

Farbøl is well-read within the international literature of memory studies and the politics of history, but she also draws on a Scandinavian tradition evolved by scholars such as Bernard Eric Jensen, Anette Warring, and Claus Bryld in Denmark and Per Aronsson in Sweden. In some ways Farbøl's research can be seen as a continuation of Bryld's and Warring's study of the collective Danish memory of the German occupation during the Second World War³ as the current ideological struggle over the Cold War is clearly connected to the different political narratives of Denmark's involvement in World War II.

Farbøl's article and research in general also need to be seen in the light of the milieu within current Cold-War studies in Denmark. To call it toxic would be an understatement. As noted in a recent review by the Norwegian historian Helge Pharo, Danish governments have for years tried to use historical inquiries funded by parliament as tools in an attempt pass 'the judgement of history' upon political opponents.⁴ This approach has been dubbed "Truth on Demand".⁵

Not surprisingly, this has politicised the field, or perhaps more correctly, it has politicised it even further as Cold War studies in Denmark were already marked by a sharp disagreement between right-wing and left-wing historians. The escalation within the last decade or so has not only resulted in an unprecedented academic infight, but also in a number of court cases, some of which have gone all the way to the Supreme Court.

This makes Farbøl's post-modernist approach refreshing. Her goal is not to pass judgement or determine who is 'right.' Her goal is to explore and map the different narratives within both the political and public sphere.

³ Claus Bryld & Anette Warring, *Besættelsestiden som kollektiv erindring. Historie- og traditionsforvaltning af krig og besættelse 1945-1997* (Roskilde : Roskilde University Press, 1998).

⁴ Helge Pharo, "Bent Jensen: Ulve, får og vogtere – Den Kolde Krig i Danmark 1945-1991, 2 bind, Gyldendal, Kbh. 2014," *Historisk Tidsskrift* Bind 114, Hæfte 2 (2014), 545. 543-561.

⁵ Thorsten Borring Olesen, "Truth on Demand. Denmark and the Cold War," *Danish Foreign Policy Yearbook* (2006), 80-113.

This may also explain how she apparently has been able to keep clear of the venomous infights within the field. This is no small feat in itself.

After a general introduction with an emphasis on historiography and theory, Farbøl's article proceeds by outlining Danish foreign policy and internal affairs during the Cold War. This is followed by an in-depth analysis of the ongoing political battle between the centre-right (the Liberals and the Conservatives) and the centre-left (the Social Democrats, the Social Liberals and the left-wing parties) over how to interpret the past and what 'lessons' are to be drawn from it. Farbøl does not directly comment upon this, but her article makes it clear that politicians have a 'pragmatic' perception⁶ of history as politicians across the line perceive history as *Magistra Vitae*. However, not unexpectedly, these different 'lessons' strongly resemble views and interests already held by the different political agents.

Farbøl argues that the politics of history are especially evident in the case of the Conservatives and Liberals (in the Scandinavian context liberalism is perceived as a right-wing political ideology), as they see the Cold War as a moral struggle between democracy (good) and totalitarianism (evil) in which their political opponents – the Social Democrats and the Social Liberals – showed themselves to be “weak, passive and irresponsible” to say nothing of the far-left, which in the eyes of the right-wing parties were close to committing treason (476).

On the basis of this historical and political background, Farbøl proceeds to present the crux of her case study: how the official project of designating the Cold War 'national heritage' in Denmark and the creation of a number of Cold War museums have institutionalised Cold War memory in Denmark.

Perhaps surprisingly her, inquiry shows that these processes were only politicised to a limited extent. The museums are in general the results of local enthusiasm, whereas the heritage project was commenced by the Ministry of Culture, but carried out by a number of museum curators without any political involvement or pressure. In the same manner, Farbøl argues that the curators at the different Cold-War museums have gone to great lengths in order not to support either a right-wing or a left-wing narrative of the Cold War in their exhibition texts (486).

However, even though these processes have been fairly unpolitical, Farbøl claims that the institutionalisation served the right-wing narrative as nearly all the heritage sites are military installations and nearly all of the museums are placed within discontinued military installations such as *Langelandsfortet* and *Stevnsfortet* (480). This – Farbøl stresses – underpins the idea that the Cold War was indeed a war, and that Denmark (unlike in 1940) was both prepared and willing to fight. Hence, the Danish Cold-War heritage supports the right-wing perception of the past. The Cold War in this view serves as a sort of 'redemption' for Denmark. In the Conservatives' and Liberals' interpretation of history, Denmark failed morally during the Second World War, first by not putting up a real fight to the German invasion in 1940, and later by collaborating with Germany between 1940 and 1943.

Even though Farbøl admits it is far more difficult to identify a non-military Cold War heritage in Denmark, she tries to make a case for the self-proclaimed autonomous free town of Christiania (placed within Copenhagen) and the state-sponsored social housing as Cold War heritage (481). Furthermore, she points to

⁶ Bernard Eric Jensen, *Hvad er historie?* (Aarhus : University Press of Aarhus, 2010), 48-52.

the fact that the Cold War exhibitions found at museums tend to have a purely military focus with little attention paid to the cultural history of the period.

This lack of heritage sites and exhibitions with a focus on the cultural history of the Cold War constitutes a problem for the left-wing narrative since it central to claims found within it. According to the left-wing narrative, Denmark was not at war. As a consequence it stresses that “in peacetime, it is the constitutional rights of the population to discuss which line of policy the government should pursue, even in foreign and security policy” (481). Naturally, the left-wing narrative has just as much to do with present Danish politics as with the past, as Farbøl correctly points out.

The article is in general clearly and coherently written, with all of its major arguments firmly supported. Farbøl’s strength is her ability to identify and analyze narratives within politics and to show how and why the past and the present are interrelated and how and why the former is used to serve the latter. This is an evidently a useful approach to study of Cold War. Furthermore, she is able to interconnect narratives on the Cold War, the Second World War, and wars of the nineteenth century⁷ in a very convincing manner. Thereby, Farbøl’s scholarship creates a larger picture of politics, political ideology, and the politics of history in Denmark over the last 150 years.

However, there are examples of ambiguity that may lead to confusion as well as claims that may be contested. A general point within the article is that the Cold War was a war without victims. As far Denmark goes this is correct as the Cold War never turned hot in Denmark. However, when the claim is first made (471, 474) it seems like a general statement on the Cold War. This is obviously problematic as the Cold War more than once turned hot even if it lacked a showdown between the two main protagonists.

There are several instances in the article where there reader is left in doubt as to whether the claims have to do with Cold War in general or Denmark specifically. One instance is Farbøl’s claim that the Cold War lacks a powerful *lieu de mémoire*. The case can be made in a purely Danish context, but it is far less convincing in an international context. The Berlin Wall is but one powerful *lieu de mémoire*, which could be mentioned.

One can also contest Farbøl’s assertion that the Cold War was a war without losers. Francis Fukuyama was able to write “*The End of History*”⁸ in last days of the Cold War due to a general percept of the West had ‘won’ and the Eastern Block had ‘lost.’ This narrative is indeed found on the website of one of the museums that Farbøl uses in her study. It reads: “The Cold War lasted until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.”⁹ The idea that the West won the Cold War can also explain why the right-wing narrative has gained

⁷ Rosanna Farbøl, “Kunsten at lægge historien til rette”: Anders Fogh Rasmussen og opgøret med den danske udenrigspolitiske tradition,” *TEMP - tidsskrift for historie*, (2012), 65-90.

⁸ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” *The National Interest* (Summer 1989), 3-18; Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press 1992).

⁹ My translation. In Danish: “Den Kolde Krig varede frem til Sovjetunionens sammenbrud i 1991.” <http://kalklandet.dk/historie/den-kolde-krig>. Accessed 22 October 2016.

momentum within the last two decades as it makes it far easier for the Conservatives and the Liberals to use the Cold War politically than it is for the left-wing, especially the far left.

In the same manner, it perhaps not all that surprising that nearly all the Cold War heritage sites that were picked focus on military installations instead of sites such as the free town of Christiania. First, the former are clear-cut cases, while the latter are not (something of which Farbøl is well aware). Second, the heritage project was placed at The Royal Danish Arsenal Museum and military historians tend to like military history, including military installations.

However, these remarks should not overshadow the overall impression of an interesting, persuasive, and generally well-argued article. Rosanna Farbøl's analysis adds to our understanding of both past and present Danish politics. Furthermore, her approach could – and should – be applied to other cases, as she herself suggests. In a Danish and Scandinavian context, Farbøl's study is a much-needed breath of fresh air in what, from the point of view of a nineteenth-century historians, seems like a toxic environment.

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